

INTERVIEW

Tokenism will not do

Funds are no constraint for the total sanitation campaign, says Union Minister for Rural Development Jairam Ramesh

G. Srinivasan

Open defecation, manual scavenging and deplorable lack of provision for public and private toilets in rural India cannot be wished away or washed down in sanctimonious homilies. In order to highlight what is being done to overcome the sanitation problem that is at the roots of ill-health and malnutrition in rural areas, *The Hindu* spoke to the Union Minister for Rural Development, Drinking Water and Sanitation, Mr. Jairam Ramesh. Mr. Ramesh concedes that the Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC) launched in 1999, was "a token sanitation campaign and not a total sanitation cam-

paign". But, says now funds are no constraint. "We have been promised Rs 36,000 crore which is a five-fold increase over the 11th Plan which shows we are serious. For the first time we have made provisions for liquid and solid waste management in the rural areas providing finance ranging from Rs 7 lakhs to Rs 20 lakhs depending upon the population of the Gram Panchayat (GP)," he says.

Excerpts from the interview:

What is being done to ramp up the sanitation programme to see that the country is rid of this scourge?

The 2011 Census results on sanitation were quite shock-

ing as there was only 33 per cent sanitation coverage. As opposed to this, States reported sanitation coverage of 68 per cent and I think we are reporting numbers which do not bear any relation to reality. I personally have seen a large number of toilets in different parts of the country which are not being used for toilets. They are being used as storage godowns. The fact that 60 per cent of all open defecation in the world are in India is a crying national shame. You don't need numbers as open defecation hits you on the face.

So, we have launched a new programme Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan. It is not a toilet construction programme but a



Jairam Ramesh.
PHOTO: V. SUDERSHAN

sociological revolution that you have to bring about in India. Sikkim has done very well and it has become India's first Nirmal State. This year I am hoping that Kerala and Himachal Pradesh might achieve that status. In Haryana one-fourth of the GPs have become Nirmal GPs and Haryana has promised that in the next two to three years, all GPs will become Nirmal GPs.

In Maharashtra, about one-third of GPs are Nirmal GPs. Here there is a very powerful social movement named after Sant Gadge Baba, a great social reformer. To make each of the 2, 40,000 GPs in the country open defecation-free will take 10 years. We have made a beginning in the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan by making the GP the anchor of the programme. We have increased the financial help for toilet construction from Rs 3500 to Rs 10,000 from this year. More importantly, we are making this a social movement. My effort to bring

Vidya Balan and Shah Rukh Khan as brand ambassadors into this programme is basically oriented towards this. Mr Bill Gates and I recently had a discussion about building a new technology for sanitation particularly in the Indian Railways as 11 million people using the system pollute the tracks every day. We are trying to bring in some technological innovation and I have visited Finland, a



MANUAL SCAVENGING: A stigma on the nation.

world leader in dry toilets. We have sent a technical team to Finland this week to follow up.

What about Sulabh and the work it has done on the sanitation front?

It is very good but is largely urban-oriented. There are 12 lakh Sulabh shauchalayas in urban India but only one lakh such facilities in rural India. Bideswar Pathak has made a great contribution as every

day one crore Indians use Sulabh toilets across the country. Census data revealed some shocking statistics on manual scavenging. We all believed this scourge was on its way out with laws of the land against it.

But 2011 Census showed that there are 2.6 million dry latrines in the country. It is a stigma on our society. Also, we have not fully understood the link between nutrition

and sanitation. Research published in British medical journal *Lancet* shows that low sanitation and poor hygiene causes malnutrition because of a phenomenon called tropical enteropathy where the guts get weakened because of the lack of proper sanitation and hygiene. This plays a far greater impact than diarrhoea. We rightly paid attention to diarrhoea and now we must pay greater attention to tropical enteropathy.

There are 8.6 lakhs accredited social health activists in the National Rural Health Mission. We are going to make them sanitation ambassadors, basically change agents for encouraging women to go in for greater sanitation and toilet use. We are also making women's self-help groups an integral part of the National Rural Livelihood Mission so that they will play a leading role in social mobilisation for sanitation over and above income-generating activities.